

State Best Practices Improving Food Stamp Program Access

United States Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
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Food Stamp Program Access State Best Practices

Questions and comments about this publication may be directed to:

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Food Stamp Program, Program Development Division
Program Design Branch
3101 Park Center Drive, Room 810
Alexandria, VA 22302
Questions? Contact: Shelia Little (703) 605-0727






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Introduction

The Food Stamp Program (FSP) mission to ensure that all Americans have access to a healthy, nutritious diet requires that the Program be operated in an effective and efficient manner. To help accomplish this mission, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is committed to work in partnership with States to improve customer service in the FSP.

In recent years, participation in food stamps has decreased dramatically. Families who remain eligible for benefits may be leaving the program due to barriers such as a lack of information or receipt of conflicting information concerning their continued eligibility. In order to help improve participation in the FSP, FNS has published guides that focus on improving access to the FSP for the elderly and disabled and working families. They are the “The Nutrition Safety Net, Help for the Elderly and Disabled”, published February, 2000, and it’s companion piece called “The Nutrition Safety Net, At Work for Families: A Primer for Enhancing the Nutrition Safety Net for Workers and Their Children, published July 14, 1999. (see www.fns.usda.gov)

In Fiscal Year 1999, FNS began conducting Program access reviews of all States to determine whether State and/or local office policies and procedures served to discourage households and individuals from applying for FSP benefits. Regional Offices (ROs) conducted the reviews to identify customer access problems and identify practices that improve customer service. While this report describes some of those practices, sufficient, well-trained and attentive workers that are open to resolving customer access problems or potential barriers to the FSP are the central criteria for improving program access. Each entry in this report contains a brief description of the initiative and includes the name and telephone number of the State contact listed in the event the reader would like more information about a particular initiative.

If you are aware of practices that contribute to customer service that other States might benefit from, please contact FNS at the following address:

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Food Stamp Program, Program Development Division
Program Design Branch
3101 Park Center Drive, Room 810
Alexandria, VA 22302

Extended Office Hours

To accommodate working clients who need to conduct appointments with their workers.

Section 1

Extended Office Hours

Arizona

All of the offices in Phoenix, Arizona have extended morning, evening, and even Saturday hours available upon request. The Glendale Office has extended their hours from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., which increases client access.

California

The Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance can take applications for food stamps (and other public assistance programs) from 7:00 a.m. until approximately 9:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Two shifts of supervisors and caseworkers are employed to cover the day and night (until Midnight). The workers have staggered schedules and share spaces with the other shift. The original goal of the best practice was to accommodate a large caseload without having to build a new facility. At the same time, this practice seeks to increase access for working families and others who have trouble getting to the office during traditional hours.

District of Columbia

In the District of Columbia, office hours for 508 Kennedy St., NW; 645 H Street, NE; 2100 Martin Luther King Ave., SE (Anacostia); 51 N. Street, NE (Eckington); and 4001 S. Capitol Street, NW (Congress Heights) have been extended so that they are now open from 8:15 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. everyday. The extended hours help the working poor who are unable to come to the centers during normal business hours.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts is encouraging local offices to expand business hours beyond the standard hours of 8:45 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Most local offices have already expanded their hours. Also, many local offices make accommodations for those individuals who are unable to come into the office during normal hours. Additionally, the State is preparing to launch a pilot in three local offices to extend hours into evenings and Saturdays. Office hours vary by local office and some are open as early as 7:00 a.m. with the majority of offices closing at 5:00 p.m. The State has a pilot program in the city of

Boston which allows all city of Boston recipients/applicants to go to one office in the City which has Saturday hours, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Michigan

The Wayne County/Medbury-Concord, Kent County, and Ingham County Offices have extended office hours to accommodate working clients. The Wayne County/ Medbury-Concord office is open from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and is open until 5:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. The Kent County office is open from 7:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, and the Ingham County office is open from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Applicants and recipients are able to come to the office before and/or after work to conduct appointments with their workers.

Minnesota

The Hennepin County, Minnesota office is open from 6:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Wednesday hours are from 6:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. The extended office hours allow customers access to county services without missing work and losing pay. Extended hours also provide workers additional flexibility in setting up work schedules.

North Carolina

The Johnston County, North Carolina office is open until 7:00 p.m. on Mondays. An applicant/recipient is seen even if it means that a worker or supervisor has to stay late.

Wisconsin

The Region 1 Office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin office is open from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. On Wednesday the office remains open until 7:00 p.m. and on Friday the office closes at 5:00 p.m. Applicants and participants, particularly those who are working, have more time during the day to schedule appointments and conduct routine business which may include, but not be limited to, filing applications and bringing in verification.

CONTACTS:

Sylvia Argel
State Quality Office
Glendale County, Arizona Office
(602) 542-5071

Robert Hunt
County Supervisor
Sacramento, California Office
(916) 875-8235

Sharon Cooper-DeLoatch
Acting Deputy Administrator
District of Columbia Office
(202) 698-3900

Andrew Zylstra
County Director
Kent County, Michigan Office
(616) 247-6000

Don Dersnah
Acting County Director
Ingham County, Michigan Office
(517) 887-9400

Betty Barnes
Income Maintenance Administrator
Johnston County, North Carolina Office
(919) 989-8723

Steve Kane
Director, Field Operations
Boston, Massachusetts Office
(617) 348-8421

Carol Thomas
County Director
Wayne County/Medbury-
Concord County, Michigan
Office
(313) 267-0340

Barbara Stillman
QC Liaison
Hennepin County, Minnesota
Office
(612) 348-8270

Delores Anderson
County Supervisor
Milwaukee, Wisconsin Office
(414) 774-9922

Additional Resources for Clients

To better serve the needs of the individual.

Section 2

Additional Resources for Clients

Client Advocates

Minnesota

Hennepin County, Minnesota provides two County employee advocates to handle all programs. They serve as a go-between connecting the client and workers. They explain policy, check to make sure policy is correct, handle client complaints, and provide community resources to clients and/or workers.

The advocates assist customers by clarifying policy, resolving complaints, and providing community resources. Since advocates are able to explain policy, this provides a break for the workers.

CONTACTS:

Terri Grina
Program Advocate
Hennepin County, Minnesota Office

(612) 348-8576

Maureen Farley
Program Advocate
Hennepin County, Minnesota
Office

(612) 348-8576

Transportation Assistance for Clients

South Carolina

The Director of the Kershaw County, South Carolina office was involved with the committee that implemented the Kershaw Connection, which is a bus line that only costs \$1.00 per passenger. It serves surrounding areas such as Camden, Lugoff, Elgin, Bethune, and Cassatt. This program helps clients who do not have transportation to get around town to doctors' appointments, the welfare office, the grocery store, or other places. Applicants/and participants are able to call and schedule transportation service to get them to different places, such as the local welfare office, medical appointments,

or grocery store.

The lack of public and personal transportation was a concern of the State advocate groups. This initial service has provided some transportation assistance needed in these counties.

CONTACT:

Meredith Morris
Program Coordinator
Kershaw County, South Carolina Office
(803) 432-7676

Full Service Centers for Clients

Maryland

In line with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services changed the way it viewed itself. The county states in its manual “**Changing the Culture of Welfare at the Local Level**” that it previously saw itself as a forms-laden bureaucracy, but was transformed to a professional Job Center offering many on-site services including: employment services, family services, food stamp benefits, temporary cash assistance, medical assistance, WIC clinics, GED preparation classes, GED testing, English as a Second Language Classes, an alternative high school for teen mothers, summer camp and after-school club for school-age children, immunizations, child support services, substance and domestic abuse screening and services, and child care for customers on site. The Job Center also provides career clothing vouchers, transportation subsidies, child care vouchers, instruction in Earned Income Credit, job fairs, and telephones for calling employers. All services are available free of charge.

The county’s overall objective is to assess the family’s needs and barriers to self-sufficiency and to assist the family in developing a plan to overcome those obstacles. The county provides all services in a one-stop shopping environment.

Minnesota

Hennepin County, Minnesota workforce centers are staffed with financial

workers who handle all aspects of on-going cases. The county has five workforce centers staffed by ten financial workers. This is to provide clients with a “one-stop” full service office in their own neighborhood. Services include employment services, family services, food stamp benefits, temporary cash assistance, child support services, etc. The impact has been very positive for both customers and workers. Parking is free for customers, staff handle clients on a more personal level, and customer and staff are able to solve problems together. Staff who live closer to work centers save time and parking fees by working in a work center. Work centers are not used for intake or new applications.

Montana

To facilitate the issuance of food stamp benefits to migrant workers in her county, Marilyn Becker, the Lake County Director, networked with officers of the Montana migrant council to set up an “in-field” one-stop shop. She contacted the cherry growers association that provided access to a field next to an abandoned cherry warehouse for them to set up this one stop shop.

The Migrant Council brought their health services and interpreters, and educational tutors to hold summer school classes for migrant children. The Lake County Office of Human Services brought two eligibility workers, two laptop computers, and had telephone lines installed, literally, in the field. These telephone lines enabled the laptops to be connected to Montana’s automated eligibility system that allowed for same day food stamp eligibility processing, benefits determination, and issuance authorization for Montana’s issuance contractor in Georgia. Health staff provided well child visits, immunizations, and general health information to the migrants in their own language. Education staff provided basic educational skills to middle school age children, and the eligibility workers provided food assistance through food stamp benefits.

The result of this effort was that 183 food stamp applications (consisting of 1,208 individuals) were taken in a friendly, accessible, and effective manner. This effort has greatly improved the timeliness and quality of service to the agency’s customers.

Nevada

The Owens office in Las Vegas, Nevada has established a presence at the Mobilized Assistance and Shelter for the Homeless (M.A.S.H.) center. This

is a full service center, housed in its own building, with numerous agencies on site. One part-time and three full-time workers are assigned to this project, to facilitate the FSP processing of homeless clients. In addition to Welfare, other agencies, such as Veteran Affairs, Child Protective Services, Nevada Legal Services, The Salvation Army, Employment Services Division and the Department of Motor Vehicles, etc., are all on site, as is the availability of pro bono legal aid. A permanent tent-like structure is constructed to house up to 400 homeless during the winter months. The Owens FSP staff were certain that many homeless participants would not be receiving benefits if it were not for this center.

The State Welfare Division also participates in two other similar centers: the Cambridge Community Center which is located in a major Las Vegas Hispanic area where the FSP effort is managed by the Belrose office, and the Cannon site which is designed to cater to the needs of the elderly and is part of the Henderson Office. These centers were initiated to provide a comprehensive continuum of integrated services dedicated to meeting the immediate needs of local residents, and to assist in breaking the cycle of homelessness while respecting the dignity of the person.

CONTACTS:

Mr. Charles E. Henry
Acting Executive Director
Anne Arundel County, Maryland Office
(410) 767-7338

Gloria Lundberg-Jogenson
Program Manager
Hennepin County, Minnesota
Economic Assistance
(612) 879-3499

Ms. Marilyn Becker
Lake County Director
Lake County, Montana Office of
Public Assistance
(406) 883-7830

Shirley Allison
Program Specialist
Las Vegas, Nevada
County Office of
(775) 687-4705

Child Care Center

Minnesota

The “Sunshine Time Drop-In Child Care” in Hennepin County, Minnesota provides day care for up to 36 children from birth to age eleven with four to

seven workers caring for the children. There are separate areas for infants, toddlers, and older children. Parents must sign for children when they pick them up and also provide a signed card from their county worker attesting to business with the county. All children wear name tags and the children's area is secured by an electronic gate. This service was implemented to allow parents to complete the application process and attend interviews without the distraction of caring for children. This practice also allows county workers to concentrate on interviews without distraction. There has been a positive impact on applicants/recipients. Customers are able to conduct business knowing that their children are being cared for in a responsible way, in a safe environment.

There is a free drop-in day care center in the Ramsey County, Minnesota building. The County contracts with Children's Home Society which pays staff salaries. The County supplies the room, materials, toys, training, and inspections. The day care center is open Monday through Friday from 8-12 noon and from 1-4 p.m. The center is easily accessed because it is near the reception area. It serves an average of 30 children per day, about 15 at any one time. The ratio of staff to children is 1-8, depending on whether a child has special needs. If the center reaches capacity, parents are put on a waiting list and paged in the reception area when slots open up. The practice was implemented to provide better and more family friendly customer service. It helps both the customers and the workers. It is much easier for customers to leave children at the center while taking care of business with the county, and easier for the staff to help and interview customers without the distraction of children.

Nevada

An agreement has been reached with the Clark County, Las Vegas, Nevada Economic Opportunity Board (EOB) to provide day care services to "at risk" food stamp clients. This service is funded with TANF monies, but for FSP-only clients who need day care to keep their job, EOB has agreed to provide 150 slots each for the Belrose and Owens offices and 100 slots for the Charleston and Henderson offices. The client chooses the day care vendor and EOB provides payment.



Rochester, New Hampshire – Contact: Terry Smith, Food Stamp Program Manager, Department of Health and Human Services,

Office of Family Services, 129 Pleasant Street, Concord, New Hampshire 03301

The Rochester District Office contracts with a co-located Head Start office to provide daycare for as many as five children while their parents or guardians are being interviewed and recertified. This allows parents to concentrate on the interview process without being preoccupied or distracted. It also promotes a quiet waiting area for other clients and caseworkers. This practice enhances client access to the FSP.

Wisconsin

The Region 1 Office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has established a child care center which is open to the general public who visit the office. Child care services are available up to four hours at a time without cost to the parent. The practice was implemented to allow parents to use other office resources more quickly and to allow interviews to be conducted without interruption from children. Both clients and workers have indicated that they appreciate having a place for children to go while business is being conducted.

CONTACTS:

Gloria Lundberg-Jorgeson
Program Manager
Hennepin County, Minnesota Office

(612) 879-3499

Shirley Allison
Program Specialist
Las Vegas, Nevada County Office
(775) 687-4705

Julia Bravo
County Supervisor
Ramsey County, Minnesota
Office

(651) 266-3760

Tony Dziedzic
Director of Operations
Milwaukee, Wisconsin Office
(414) 267-3150

Satellite Offices

Arizona

To provide greater access to services, Department of Economic Security in Phoenix, Arizona has four satellite offices in hospitals around the State. People can drop off applications and receive services at these offices. Applications then go to the main office and eligibility is determined after review by the caseworker.

Minnesota

The Ramsey County office has ten sites in various communities which offer a variety of services. They are staffed by twenty-four Minnesota Family Investment Project (MFIP) workers whose caseloads are located at the site. Other site staff include managers, intake workers for programs other than food stamps, social workers, and job Coordinators. A manager is dedicated to the project. Intensive planning and negotiating were required on a variety of issues. This service was initiated as part of Welfare Reform to assist customers. Clients are able to stay in their own neighborhood and have easier access to a variety of services. Workers are offered more flexible work hours and are also given the opportunity to work more independently. Applications are taken for all programs at the site, but only on-going MFIP cases are maintained there. All other cases are sent to the main office. Detailed information about the process is available upon request.

CONTACTS:

Sylvia Argel
State Quality Officer
Phoenix, Arizona Office
(602) 542-5071

Tim Smith
Income Maintenance Division (IMD)
Manager
Ramsey County, Minnesota
(651) 266-3849

Drop Box Access

Indiana

A locked drop box is located near the receptionist window in the main waiting area at the Lafayette Road Office in Indiana. Participants are encouraged to use the drop box to provide their eligibility workers with verification and to report changes. Change report forms are provided near the box. The box is checked every day and any verifications and change report forms left there are taken to the proper eligibility worker for immediate action. The box is primarily used when there is a long line of people at the receptionist window and when participants may not want to wait to be seen. The box is only available to participants during office hours. This practice provides clients with a more convenient method to provide verification and report changes. It has been recommended that the office

relocate the drop box to a place that is accessible outside of regular office hours so that recipients are able to access the drop box during as many hours as possible.

Michigan

A drop box is located in the reception area at the Ingham County, Michigan office for recipients to provide information to their workers. The drop box was implemented to improve customer service and to provide a system for which recipients can give their worker information without having to see their worker. Recipients believe the drop box is a great service since they can provide information to their worker without having to wait to see the worker.

A drop box is located at the reception desk at the Wayne County/Medbury-Concord, Michigan office for recipients to provide information to their workers. The box was installed to improve customer service and to provide a system through which recipients can give their worker information without having to see their worker. Recipients believe the drop box is a great service.

Minnesota

The Ramsey County office in Minnesota has a “forms” drop-off-box approximately 10 feet from the street curb, directly outside the main entrance to the building. The practice was implemented for the convenience of clients as parking near the building is difficult.

It also allows for the drop off of forms after hours, before hours, and on the weekend. Customers appreciate this service as forms can be returned to the county at a time that is convenient to the client. In addition, clients save postage fees and can turn in information promptly without the delays associated with mailing information. This allows for last minute actions, reduces congestion in the lobby, and does not require a receptionist. The county also has a special drop-off slot in the lobby that is useful when receptionists are busy.

New Mexico

The Northeast Bernalillo, New Mexico County Office has developed a form entitled “Information Report” (Form 109). This form allows clients to leave changes when the eligibility workers are busy and cannot see the clients. It gives the clients a receipt that shows they provided information to the office.

CONTACTS:

Mary Duffy-Lewis
Office Director
Lafayette Road, Indiana Office
(317) 329-1571

Don Dersnah
Acting Director
Ingham County, Michigan Office
(517) 887-9400

Carol Thomas
County Director
Wayne County/Medbury-Concord,
Michigan Office
(313) 267-0340

Nancy Cincotta
Financial Assistance Manager
Ramsey County, Minnesota Office
(651) 266-4545

Olivia Angus
County Director
Northeast Bernalillo, New Mexico Office
(505) 841-7918

Contract Interpreters

District of Columbia

The District of Columbia utilizes a telephone communications provider (Language Learning Enterprises, Inc.) to assist non-English speaking or limited English speaking households in communicating with Income Maintenance staff. In situations where staff and customers are unable to communicate due to language difficulties, they may access the telephone provider for assistance. The provider assists in translating more than 100 languages.

Minnesota

Ramsey County, Minnesota maintains a computerized interpreter schedule to ensure interpreters are available for non-English speaking clients. The schedule includes dates and times of contracted interpreters as well as county workers designated as interpreters. Workers can access the schedule and book the interpreter as needed. Customers are at ease and can communicate effectively in their spoken language. Workers also appreciate the assistance provided by the interpreters. Procedures for workers needing an interpreter are to contact a contract interpreter first. If one is not available, workers contact a co-worker who has the language skills needed.

North Dakota

In less than two years, the Cass County, North Dakota office has provided services to 320 households consisting of 880 individuals from 19 different countries or ethnic backgrounds. The resettlement agency in Cass County is very aware of the food stamp application process and the importance of the application date in the determination of benefits. Therefore, the County has the refugees apply for food stamps upon arrival or resettlement in Fargo. Unfortunately, most of these individuals have very limited English speaking ability that generally creates a major problem during the application and interview process.

To deal with this service delivery issue, Cass County has contracted for on-call interpreters to assist their staff during intake and ongoing face-to-face discussions. Currently, they have sixteen individuals under contract, with some speaking more than one language. The languages are Vietnamese, French, Bosnian, Albanian, Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Somali, Spanish, and Russian. This service greatly improves the timeliness and quality of food stamp program services to customers who do not speak English.

CONTACTS:

Sharon Cooper DeLoatch
Acting Deputy Administrator
District of Columbia Department
of Human Services
(202) 698-3900

Rose Rison
Supervisor of Interpreters
Ramsey County, Minnesota of
Office
(651) 266-4366

Ms. Alice Swenson
Economic Assistance Supervisor
Cass County, North Dakota Office
(701) 241-5761

Orientation Program for Clients

Maine

The Maine Department of Human Services has made Program access a priority from the Commissioner's level down and has striven to ensure that new applicants are aware of all available services to bridge the gap from welfare to work. An integral part of this effort is an Orientation Program for

new public assistance or food stamp applicants developed and implemented in September 1997, which presents detailed information on all transitional services available. This program provides potential recipients with information on the Food Stamp Program and its eligibility requirements, thereby eliminating many misconceptions.

Wyoming

The Rock Springs, Wyoming office, DFS staff participate in the annual Head Start Program orientation to explain services available and to assist with application procedures. They also have regular contact with the local hospital and are available to follow up with referrals for service from the hospital. Additionally, a group of service providers meet at least twice a year to inform the mining populations that will predictably be laid off of the procedures for applying for all types of assistance. These providers include ministerial agencies, DFS, Social Services, Headstart, local schools, colleges, hospitals, and food pantries. By joining together these service providers, duplication of effort is avoided for clients as well as providers and issues such as transportation are easily addressed at the meeting. Since this practice has been used for about ten years, it is difficult to quantify any changes in service. However, it positively reflects upon the agencies and gives those present a more personal service by identifying contact persons within the agencies.

CONTACTS:

Rick Morrow
Food Stamp Program Manager
Maine Department of Human Services
(207) 287-5093

Pauline Carpenter
Benefit Specialist Supervisor
Wyoming Department of
Family Services
(307) 362-5630

TDD Telephone

North Carolina

Johnston County, North Carolina has a phone that allows for communication with the deaf. This allows hearing-impaired clients to call and communicate with their case managers directly.

CONTACT:

Betty Barnes
Income Maintenance Administrator
Johnston County, North Carolina Office
(919) 989-8723

Self-Help Area for Clients

Rhode Island

The Providence Regional Family Center, the local food stamp office in Providence, Rhode Island, provides a self-help area for clients in the main waiting room. The self-help area includes forms, a free copy machine, and drop boxes for submittal. It allows food stamp clients to provide documents, report changes and gather information without waiting to see a worker. In the future, the self-help area will be fully staffed to provide basic Program information to clients as well. The self-help area was implemented March 2000 by the Regional Manager in order to allow clients an easier way to communicate information.

CONTACT:

Gabriella K. Barros
Regional Manager
Rhode Island Department of Human Services
(401) 222-7300

Information Center for Clients

Indiana

An Information Center at the 420 Hoffman Office in Hammond, Indiana is equipped with three walk-up windows located outside the main waiting area. Three workers and one supervisor staff the center. Persons can walk up to these windows and get answers to general questions or have workers look up their cases on a nearby computer terminal. The center is also equipped to accept verification and copy documentation from the clients for their workers. Change reports and requests for food stamp identification cards can also be processed here. The Center also accepts all incoming telephone calls to the Hammond office and directs those calls to the appropriate location. The Center was created to reduce the number of

visitors and calls to eligibility workers and to better serve the needs of persons requesting general and specific Program information. Eligibility workers only receive calls that require a response from them. Customers are served more quickly.

Tennessee

Electronic Message Boards are located in the reception area of each office in Nashville, Tennessee. The boards keep clients informed of important issues and reminders. Most messages are aimed at preventing Program errors or abuse. Each county office has flexibility in changing the messages on the board. This helps when the same questions are asked frequently.

CONTACTS:

Marguerite Hamphill
Office Director
Hammond, Indiana Office
(219) 937-0232

Lionel Senseney
District Director
Robertson and Wilson County
Tennessee Offices
(615) 532-2774

Food Stamp Program Information Efforts

Idaho

Teams of eligibility workers (EW) in Boise, Idaho go out to sites such as a health care clinic or a senior center to take applications once a month. Each unit of EW's adopts an outreach-related project each month. The office is concerned with ensuring that the community knows about their services, and came up with this idea. It has increased client's knowledge of their programs and access to them.

Minnesota

The Hennepin County, Minnesota office has sixteen outreach sites to assist clients in applying for food stamp benefits. The outreach plan was developed to better serve clients. The outreach workers take little time off allowing them to serve clients in a continuous manner. Clients benefit by being able to apply for food stamps at a location closer to their homes than the main downtown office.

Oklahoma

The Oklahoma (B) County office is a member of a group called “Community Partners.” Through this consortium of local non-profit service organizations, clients are easily referred to agencies outside the State agency umbrella of benefits. These same organizations also provide referrals to the Food Stamp Program, effectively acting as outreach centers throughout the area. This procedure supports community knowledge of availability of benefits/services.

CONTACTS:

LeAnn Simmons

Community Resource Development
Specialist

Boise, Idaho Office
(208) 334-6799

Kimberly Brown

Economic Assistance Unit Supervisor
Hennepin County, Minnesota Office
(612) 879-3508

David Reeves

County Director
Oklahoma County Office
(405) 739-8010

Social Service Information Displays

Rhode Island

The Providence Regional Family Center, the local food stamp office in Providence, Rhode Island, invites vendors, non-profit groups, and others providing social welfare information to set up displays in their waiting room. Groups that have provided information displays include Goodwill, GED class providers, a WIC medical van, and welfare-to-work groups. The Providence center provides a desirable audience for social services because it serves a large population and administers a variety of programs in addition to the Food Stamp Program. The center also allows community groups to hold meetings in their conference rooms. The Providence center is in the process of expanding their messages by adding a television to the waiting room. The television programming will include informational messages about a variety of subjects in between entertainment programs.

CONTACT:

Gabriella K. Barros
Regional Manager
Providence, Rhode Island Office
(401) 222-7300

Informational CD-ROM

Oklahoma

In support of an efficient application process which enhances the community view of the State Agency (SA) and local office ability to effectively administer the FSP, the Oklahoma (B) County office, has developed a method to assure consistent information to all applicants/recipients regarding their rights and responsibilities. In September 1999, the State agency produced a CD-ROM called "Food Stamps: Rights & Responsibilities" that was piloted in the Oklahoma (B) County office. Approximately 4 minutes long, and now available on the State agency intranet, the material is played for clients during the interview process. It provides basic rights and responsibilities information that is further supplemented by the full Rights and Responsibilities Statement that is provided to all clients. The county office staff report that this material captures clients' attention and effectively gets the message across.

CONTACT:

Linda Hughes
Program Director
Oklahoma County Office
(405) 521-2937

STATE WEBSITE



Berks County, Pennsylvania – Contact: Gary Rightmire, Executive Director, Berks County Assistance Office, Department of Public Welfare, 625 Cherry Street, Reading, Pennsylvania, 19602-1188, (610) 736-4242.

The County assistance office (CAO) promotes the State's website to community organizations to facilitate access to the Food Stamp Program. The CAO sent a one-page flyer to a variety of community organizations to

promote downloading and printing applications for various services from the State's website. This effort was made to help the community organizations, many of which assist the public in filing applications for services.

At both the State website and Department of Public Welfare site for FSP information, the public can find detailed information including the physical address, toll-free telephone number and fax number of every CAO in the State, income and resource limits for participation, some questions and answers, participation statistics by month, the full 16 page common application form (PA 600) for FSP, MA, TANF and other programs offered by the State, and the shortened recertification application form. The application forms are not interactive, are available for the public to print, complete, and return to the CAO.

This appears to be a low cost and effective approach to open communication with the advocate community and to increase access to services.

CALL CENTER



Newport News, Virginia - Contact: Ruby Reeves, Chief of Financial Services, Newport News Department of Social Services, (757) 926-6332

The Call Center was implemented by the local agency in September 1999. Clients call a non toll-free number 7AM through 7 PM to request and provide information. To preserve confidentiality, the clerks who answer the calls, ask callers to provide their social security number and verify their identity. The clerks are not allowed to give information if the callers cannot verify their identity. The callers must be the clients in the case or the guardians.

The Call Center has a the following advantages:

- 1) Enables clients to speak with someone instead of leaving a message on a case- worker's voice mail.
- 2) Provides clients general information, such as the status of their case and amount of benefits,
- 3) Allows clients to schedule recertification appointments that are more convenient for them.

- 4) Reminds clients of their recertification including the date and time of the interview.
- 5) Records and monitor reported changes
- 6) Provides caseworkers with more “quiet” time to process cases.
- 7) Provides caseworkers with a printed copy of state and local computer screens that pertain to the reported changes.

The impact of the Call Center on applicants and/or recipients has been positive. Local agency staff reported that:

- 1) Each of the four clerks handle 1500 to 2,00 calls each month.
- 2) The number of clients who did not attend the recertification appointment was reduced from 60 percent to 20 percent.
- 3) The caseworkers had more time to process cases.
- 4) It is felt that since the four clerks above, formerly received public assistance, they have a better understanding of some client's circumstances.

TOLL FREE NUMBER



Jefferson County, Alabama – Contact: James Kilgore, Food Stamp Program Manager (205) 599-6046.

In June 2001, an 1-800 phone number was installed where clients could call the county food stamp office and through an automated system could 1) inquire on the status of their case; 2) report changes; and 3) report any problems with their EBT card/pin number, lost card, etc.

The number is given to the client at the time of their interview and is also posted in the waiting room. This allows the client to receive information in a timely manner without having to talk to their caseworker. This practice also frees up time that the caseworker would have otherwise had to use to handle these types of calls.

Monthly Community Meetings



Detroit Michigan (Tireman Office) - Contact: Ms. Sandra Hyche Thomas, FIM, 8031 Tireman Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48204, (313) 934-2489.

Monthly meetings are hosted by various community agencies. At these meetings, agencies share program policies, procedures and customer services. Many community agencies (public and private) are interested in updates from the FSP

The meetings have had a positive impact on new applicants and recipients. Community agencies can share correct policies with their clients and this makes it easier for applicants to know what to expect when they are referred from a community agency to the Family Independence office for assistance. The local office staff have also given Food Stamp Program and EBT presentations to local residents at local churches, schools and community meetings held at mini-police stations within the community. These meetings have been well received by residents of the community.

Spanish Language Newspaper



Tulare County, California (Visalia and Tulare District Offices)
– **Contact:** Mr. John Perrott, Program Manager, 5957 S. Mooney Blvd, Visalia, California, (559) 737-4660.

In October 2000, an article on the FSP was written and placed in La VOZ del Pueblo, one of the most widely distributed and most read Spanish-language newspapers in the area. The article stressed the benefits that the FSP offers and dealt with concerns specific to the Hispanic community, such as myths that the FSP is a welfare program and that receiving food stamps will affect immigration status in a negative way. The false beliefs were addressed and numbers to each local office were provided in the article.

Application Processing

To assist clients in setting priorities in general, and make the application process less overwhelming by breaking it into manageable components.

Section 3

Application Processing

Simplified Food Stamp Application

Oregon

The pilot food stamp outreach committee in East Multnomah County, Oregon decided to simplify the food stamp application as part of a test project. Because of statewide pressure and interest, the committee was expanded and the simplified application will go statewide in July 2000. The application is 4 pages long and combines eligibility for food stamps, child care, emergency assistance, and medical programs. A cover page explains the process and lists what to bring to appointments. Only one sheet needs to be added for TANF. The goal is to remove barriers to applying for food stamps. People are often overwhelmed with the 15 pages of application and addenda now distributed. With the four-page format and a good cover sheet on what to bring to the appointment, applicants can sit down and fill out the application and submit it on the spot to reduce the time it actually takes to begin receiving benefits.

South Carolina

In 1995, the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture entered into an agreement with the South Carolina Department of Social Services to implement a demonstration project to improve the delivery of food assistance to elderly and disabled Supplemental Security income (SSI) recipients. This project was designed to use a single application to enroll clients in both SSI and the Food Stamp Program (FSP). To ensure food stamp eligibility, only one-person SSI households were eligible to participate.

CONTACT:

Sue Esther Johnson
Program Coordinator
South Carolina Department of Social Services
(803) 773-5531

Decreased Waiting Time for Clients

Arkansas

Timely application processing enhances the community's view of agency responsiveness and effectiveness, and encourages requests for applications. In Craighead County timely processing of applications is a team effort facilitated by:

- 1) Monday Supervisor/Worker individual meetings to spend "quality time" discussing applications pending and no shows. If a case is pending information return, ways that may help the client or staff obtain the information are discussed. The goal is to process all cases as soon as the information is available, to avoid holding them until due dates arrive. Knowing that early return of information facilitates early processing motivates clients.
- 2) Every worker is assigned a "buddy" who helps process applications when a worker is absent. Close attention to leave and holidays is paid to determine if cases need reassignment to the buddy.

Since clients are receiving their benefits sooner, the number of complaints has dropped. The process has helped Craighead County reduce the number of applications going over 25 days. The workers are involved in group activities such as pot luck, eating out, and other get-togethers at least three times a year. This helps the workers feel more connected, and helps enhance the buddy system.

Kansas

The Wichita, Kansas office has a procedure where clients walk in and are seen by an eligibility worker within 20 to 30 minutes. Clients do not have to schedule their appointments for certification for another day, which could cause a barrier to participation. This is of great benefit to clients entering the workforce and trying to balance family needs as smoothly as possible.

Every Monday evening, the office stays open until 7:00 p.m. Clients do not need an appointment and only see one worker for what that they need. The most recent innovation was the reconfiguring of the traffic flow for the three floors of the building used by the Department of Integrated Service Delivery. Clients no longer clog up the entry lobby waiting to check in as they are directed by signs or workers to help them find the appropriate areas. The goal was to make the office traffic run more smoothly and efficiently, to

create a more professional environment.

Clients have reported through surveys that they most appreciate having one worker who helps them get what they need to survive and be successful. They praise the help their worker provides with paperwork and the fact that they keep the same worker. They also appreciate getting help within the week it is requested, and they feel that their workers listen to them.

Michigan

To improve customer service and lessen waiting times, a sign is located in the waiting area in the Wayne County/Medbury-Concord, Michigan office informing all individuals to let the receptionist know if they have been waiting for more than a half hour. Applicants and recipients believe that they will receive service within a relatively short period of time, and if they do not, they know whom they should talk to.



Saginaw County, Michigan – Contact: Diane Drouin, Family Independence Agency – Saginaw County Office, 411 East Genesee, Saginaw, Michigan 48605, (989) 758-1591.

Tracking Waiting Times. The Office uses cards to track the time it takes for applicants and participants to see eligibility workers. Applicants and participants are given tracking cards that indicate the time that prescreening interviews or contacts with receptionists are finished. Cards are then given to staff and when workers call for the client, the times are recorded. The difference between the times indicates how long it takes for workers to call clients. This was instituted as a continuous improvement measure to determine a baseline of how long it takes for customers to go through the application process and to see their workers. If the procedure determines that the wait time is too long, then changes may be implemented in the office to reduce waiting times to improve customer service

Minnesota

There are signs in the Hennepin County, Minnesota office, advising clients to approach the desk if their waiting time is in excess of 20 minutes. This is to alert caseworkers of the amount of time clients have been waiting and to possibly speed up the process.

North Carolina

The County Director for Johnston County, North Carolina insists that a potential applicant be seen within 30 minutes. A stick-on badge is provided to all potential applicants and/or recipients when they come into the office showing arrival time. Supervisors monitor the time it takes for clients to be seen. Clients are able to plan a visit since they know that they will be seen within 30 minutes.

Utah

A greeter/Information Specialist (IS) is used in the main waiting area as the first client contact in the Utah County Office to guide clients toward the appropriate services. As the receptionists are a major hub of information and responsibility, an IS might reduce the wait time for a client needing a simple brochure, directions, or an answer to a simple question. This has been a very useful tool in Utah. The purpose was to improve customer service and serve the needs of clients as quickly as possible. Utah has a zero wait time policy for client service upon entering an Employment Center (EC). IS's assist in making this happen.

The EC design incorporates all of what Utah felt to be better customer service procedures. The Information Specialist and zero wait time were part of that design. Although no data have been produced to show increased efficiencies due to the presence of Information Specialists, it is apparent upon entering an EC that clients are put at ease and given useful information immediately. This is also a point where applications are dispersed and clients can be directed to computer centers, resume writing information, or to employment or eligibility workers.

Although the IS staff is part of the EC design, it is transferable to any state's reception area, and can be easily implemented. It does not duplicate efforts of a receptionist, but rather enhances their ability to more effectively do their job. Using IS's may require a slight change in reception duties, but reduces client wait time and directs them to the proper resources immediately.

CONTACTS:

Tammy Holman
ES Supervisor
Craighead County
Arkansas Office
(304) 528-5810

Linda Sorrell
Director of Integrated Service Delivery
Wichita, Kansas Office
(316) 337-6410

Carol Thomas
County Director
Wayne County/Medbury-Concord,
Michigan Office
(612) 348-8270

Barbara Stillman
QC Liaison
Hennepin County, Minnesota Office
(313) 267-0340

Betty Barnes
Income Maintenance Administrator
Johnston County, North Carolina
(919) 989-8723

Jean Steidl
Payment Accuracy Coordinator
Office Utah County Office
(801) 526-9782

Information and Verification Reminders

Alabama

In Autauga County, Alabama, quarterly visits are made by the Food Stamp supervisor to area Nutrition Centers for the handicapped and the elderly. The visits are designed to aid the residents of the centers in applying for food stamps and by reporting household circumstances.

Colorado

In El Paso County, Colorado, to ensure continuance of benefits, reminders are added to the bottom of all TANF notices of discontinuance encouraging clients to ask their workers about food stamps even though they are no longer eligible for TANF. This notice is on all Colorado notices of discontinuance. As a client service, this helps ensure that information is available to clients through a written reminder if not through a worker.

Mississippi

In Jasper County, Mississippi, when workers send appointment letters out to the clients, they remind clients of information and verification they will need to bring with them to the interview. This procedure was implemented to reduce the number of cases pending and the number of revisits to the local offices to complete the certification process. Also, it serves as a reminder to clients to bring the necessary information to the interview session to ensure that the certification process can be completed during the initial visit. The process reduces/eliminates clients' need to return to the local office to provide information that they may have forgotten if otherwise not given a reminder. The number of cases pending and the number of revisits to the

office is practically eliminated, and the interview process can be completed in a timely manner.

Nevada

A worker in the Owens office in Las Vegas, Nevada has developed a “red dot” system to facilitate applicants’ quicker receipt of food stamp benefits. Since food stamps usually require less verification than TANF, when the worker gives her clients a list of what she needs in order to process their applications, she puts red dots next to the food stamp requirements, and tells the clients that if they concentrate on the “red dots”, she will be able to process their food stamps right away. The “red dot” system also assists clients in setting priorities in general, and makes the application process less overwhelming by breaking it into manageable components.

New Mexico

Northeast Bernalillo, New Mexico has developed a “What You Still Need” form. This form alerts the client the verification information still needed for certification. The use of this form minimizes the number of visits to the local office for applicants, participants and assures they have full information advising them of any outstanding verifications.

Tennessee

In Nashville, Tennessee, each county is currently using a “verification envelope.” It is printed with suggestions and supplied to clients as a way of keeping up with documents needed at each appointment. The idea was developed by the statewide Family Assistance Advisory Team.

CONTACTS:

Ruth Howard
Food Stamp Supervisor Manager,
Autaga County, Alabama Office
(334) 361-3778

Ron Rice
Food Stamp Program
El Paso County, Colorado Office
(303) 866-2538

Bonnie Grantham
County Director
Jasper County, Mississippi Office
(601) 764-2151

Shirley Allison
Program Specialist
Owens County, Nevada Office
(775) 687-4705

Olivia Angus

Susan Kirk

County Director
Northeast Bernalillo,
New Mexico Office
(505) 841-7918

District Director
Hamilton County Tennessee Office
(423) 634-6751

Initial Screening Process

New Mexico

Efficient application processing enhances the community's view of agency responsiveness and effectiveness. It also encourages requests for applications and assures a full understanding of decisions and requirements. South Dona Ana, New Mexico developed an "Expedited Application Screening Form, FSP 134", which is provided to the client and specifies in writing that clients who do not agree with the office decision concerning expedited service may meet with a supervisor within 2 days to tell the supervisor why they think the decision is wrong. The form further explains that even if clients do not meet with the supervisor, the application will still be processed in the next 30 days. Clients are requested to sign the form and check the appropriate block as to whether or not they want to meet with a supervisor. This form gives clients the opportunity to tell the supervisor why they think the decision is wrong and establishes checks and balances to assure appropriate expedited decision-making.

CLIENT TRACKING SYSTEM



Fairfield County, South Carolina – Contact: Ann Langley,
Program Coordinator (803) 635-5502.

Client Tracking System. The County has developed a client contact tracking system for the Food Stamp Program that tracks the client's initial contact to the county office. Any program contacts are tracked, i.e., in person, telephone, or by mail. The tracking system measures the time from the initial contact to the date the application is filed to the actual day of the interview. In addition, the tracking system produces a monthly management report that is used to make necessary adjustments in the process of staff

assignment. This practice was developed as a result of the Fairfield County Assessment to improve increased client access to the Food Stamp Program.

Out-Stationed Employees



Detroit, Michigan (McNichols) Office – Contact: Gloria Lumetta, FIM, 2400 E. McNichols, Road, Detroit, Michigan 48212, (313) 852-239.

One employee is out-stationed in a small office located in a nearby housing complex. Office furnishings, equipment and supplies were provided for the small office which shares space with other civic organizations located in a housing unit within the complex. Plans are currently underway to establish computer access to this remote office location. This type of office is a step toward convenient one-stop services for customers who live in the area.



Section 4

Ongoing Case Processing

Review of Closed Cases



Chicago, Illinois (Southeast Local Office) - Contact: Denise White, Local Office Administrator, Illinois Department of Human Services, Southeast Local Office, 8001 S. Cottage Grove, Chicago, Illinois 60617.

In order to ensure that no food stamp case is automatically denied or canceled when TANF is denied or canceled, the supervisory staff in this office review reports of closed TANF cases twice a month to ensure that a separate food stamp determination was made by the worker and food stamps continued, if eligible. This process is a double check to ensure that food stamps are not automatically denied or canceled when TANF is denied or canceled.

This procedure has helped to identify sooner those applicants and recipients who were incorrectly denied or terminated from receiving food stamps and helps to ensure that benefits are being restored in a more timely manner.

In-House Review Team



Chicago, Illinois (South Suburban) – Contact: Linda Shumate, Local Office Administrator, Illinois Department of Human Services, South Suburban Local Office, 14820 S. Kedzie Avenue, Midlothian, Illinois, 60445.

An In House Review Team reviews negative cases for all programs to ensure that cases were properly denied or canceled. The team randomly conducts reviews of cases and provides a double check to ensure that the negative action taken by the worker was correct. Therefore, applicants and recipients who were incorrectly denied or terminated for food stamps are being identified sooner and benefits are being restored in a timely manner.

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U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC, 20250
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